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ABSTRACT

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A Responsive Approach to Evaluating an Alcohol Education Project for Youth

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Running head: A Responsive Approach to Evaluating a Youth Project

Abstract

Elements of the responsive approach (Stake, 1975) were utilized for evaluating an alcohol education project for youth conducted through the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service. The evaluation responded to various audiences' requirements for information about issues in which they were interested. The evaluation was oriented toward describing the program activities and providing a feeling for the quality of the experience of the young people who participated in the program. Oral and written reporting methods were utilized which allowed for interaction between the program participants and staff, evaluator, and audiences requesting the evaluation.

A Responsive Approach to Evaluating an Alcohol Education Project for Youth

An alcohol education program for youth was planned and developed as a district project in the Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service. At the completion of the two-year activity, there was considerable interest in an evaluation because of the nature of the program and favorable feedback about it.

Those interested in an evaluation of the project included the project directors, state and district 4-H staff, and staff from the Nebraska Prevention Center for Alcohol and Drug Abuse. The project directors who organized the program were receiving inquiries about the format of the program from other groups and they also wanted documentation of the activities of participants. State 4-H staff were interested in providing district 4-H staff with a feeling of what happened in the program and how participants felt about it along with a description of the program activities. The Nebraska Prevention Center for Alcohol and Drug Abuse was interested in providing examples of programs on substance abuse along with a description of the participants' involvement.

Therefore, the need emerged for an evaluation which would include a description of the program activities, provide staff with a feeling of what happened in the program and how the participants felt about it, and provide a resource for other groups or individuals. A procedure was needed which was sensitive to the uniqueness of the program and gave a

feeling for the quality of the experience for these young people. Therefore, the responsive approach appeared to be an evaluation technique which offered the type of information state 4-H staff and other outside agencies were asking for.

Responsive Evaluation Model

The responsive approach as identified by Robert Stake (1975) provided the format which was adapted for an evaluation of the alcohol education program for youth. Theoretically, the responsive approach gathers and shares essential information, especially value-oriented information about a particular educational program. The approach responds to the nature of the program (people, territory, activities, effects) and concerns of its constituents. It is organized around observations of activities, interviews with constituents, and reports that illuminate and bring understanding. Feedback to administrators is likely to be informal and intermittant. It follows a discourse style suitable to each audience and might be organized around educational, social, political, institutional, or personal issues.

Description of the Program

The alcohol education program for youth was developed as a district activity for a 4-H project in the Cooperative Extension Service. The program provided experiences in which youth might participate so they

could learn and practice skills required for leadership roles. The program was called, "Reflections in a Glass," and was planned and developed by a committee consisting of teenagers who worked with several 4-H district staff members and other Cooperative Extension staff from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Members of the youth committee collected a variety of resource materials and planned a two-day workshop with speakers, discussion groups, panels, films, etc., which formed the basis for a learning experience about alcohol use and misuse. Throughout the year following the training workshop, participants made presentations at grade schools, high schools, 4-H clubs, and other youth groups. Some also made presentations at various adult meetings. In addition, they entered speech contests, wrote newspaper articles, made displays, and one individual was on a local television program. The participants felt a sense of accomplishment and success throughout the first year and requested to have the project repeated a second year. Over the two-year period, 54 youth participated in the two-day workshops and followed up with activities in their local communities.

Application of the Responsive Approach to Evaluating the Alcohol Education Program

Stake (1975) identified three elements of the responsive approach which apply to the evaluation of the alcohol education program for youth.

He said, "The evaluation is responsive if it 1) responds to audience requirements for information, 2) orients more directly to program activities than to program intents, and 3) the different value-perspectives present are referred to in reporting the success and failure of the program."

The first element mentioned was *responding to audience requirements for information.* The type of information needed by the various audiences was identified through personal interviews with administrative personnel of the Cooperative Extension Service, staff working with the program, and personnel from outside agencies. This information was obtained by asking three basic questions:

1. Who is interested in the evaluation and why?
2. What decisions are to be made as a result of the evaluation?
3. What do you want to know about the project?

The compiled responses to these questions identifed the general purpose for the evaluation, and more precisely identified those interested in the evaluation and their particular needs.

Because several groups were interested in the evaluation, a five-person advisory committee was formed with representation from the district and state 4-H staff, the Nebraska Prevention Center for Alcohol and Drug Abuse, and the staff who implemented the program. They provided specific guidance and direction, and reacted to the various steps of the evaluation process so adjustments and corrections could be made as necessary. The various committee members also participated in different roles throughout

the evaluation process ranging from active involvement in collecting, writing, and presenting information relating to a specific objective to that of advisor or reactor to the overall process.

The second element of the responsive evaluation approach was that *evaluation is oriented more directly toward program activities than program intents*. One of the primary needs included as part of the evaluation of the alcohol education program was a description of it. Initially, a narrated slide presentation by the district staff member working with the program to the state 4-H staff provided an overview of how the program was developed and implemented. However, a more detailed description which was readily assessable to others interested in such a program was still needed. Therefore, a written description of the workshop activities provided a resource for individuals or groups who might be reviewing different programs designed to teach youth about alcohol use and misuse. This written description was a coordinated effort by two of the staff who worked on the program and the evaluator.

Another reason for the evaluation was the need to identify how the participants felt about their educational experience at the workshop and how they felt about participating in this program. Therefore, a mail questionnaire was designed to survey attitudes and feelings of the participants rather than measure whether the goals and objectives of the program were completed.

Another topic of general interest by the advisory committee was the identification of what happened in the communities as a result of the program. Although the questionnaire dealt with this topic, more accurate information was obtained from the staff member who had direct interaction with the participants and provided the information for the reporting process.

As interaction occurred between district and state staff, and the evaluator, it became apparent that an example of what the program participants were doing in the local communities would provide a greater understanding. Therefore, selected participants were invited to make personal presentations about their involvement in the program to state and district 4-H staff.

The third element identified for the responsive approach is that *different value-perspectives are referred to in reporting the successes and failures of the program.* Two levels of values emerged throughout the evaluation of the alcohol education program for youth. First, how do adult sponsors for a youth program about alcohol use and misuse relate to the use of alcoholic beverages in their own lives? Second, should the Cooperative Extension Service encourage and support this type of program even though it was utilized as the subject matter to provide experiences to complete a 4-H project called, "Serving as a Junior Leader?"

These questions were raised as part of the final oral report from the evaluator and the advisory committee to the Nebraska 4-H staff.

Differing points of view on these issues were expressed which helped 4-H administrators consider the pros and cons of implementing this type of program.

Conclusions About Appropriateness of Responsive Approach

Utilizing the responsive approach in evaluating the alcohol education program for youth provided the format to meet the needs of the district and state 4-H staff, and the Nebraska Prevention Center for Alcohol and Drug Abuse. These needs included describing the program and the participants' activities rather than focusing on goals and objectives.

An overall evaluation design was identified but it was flexible so adaptations could be made as the evaluator was stimulated by the subjects and the activities. Data collection methods were subjective and included letters from workshop leaders, reports from and interviews with program directors, and a mail questionnaire to workshop participants.

The responsive approach allowed for feedback to staff to be both formal and informal with written and oral reports designed to help understand the nature of the program. The major report to Extension staff consisted of a panel in which program participants portrayed some of their activities at the local level, the evaluator described her findings, and the advisory committee raised questions of concern about the program. A written report (Rockwell, Stohler, & Rottmann, Note 1) was distributed

through the Nebraska Prevention Center for Alcohol and Drug Abuse to be used as a reference for others interested in conducting youth programs on alcohol use and misuse.

Informal feedback from district and state Extension staff, and the Prevention Center staff, indicated the evaluation was meaningful and it is having an effect on future program considerations.

Reference Note

1. Rockwell, S.K., Stohler, R.F., & Rottmann, L.H. 4-H junior leader alcohol education project (Nebraska Prevention Center for Alcohol and Drug Abuse, Report No. 2). University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1981.

Reference

Stake, R.E. (Ed.) Evaluating the arts in education: A responsive approach. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Publishing Co., 1975.